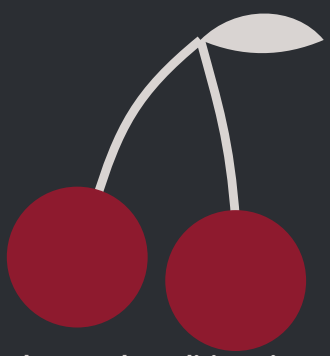
READING SAMPLE

5 Minutes

The Little Delay and Everything It Leaves Behind

Erich Simon

Prologue and Chapter 1



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For my wife Nataliia,

who has been with me through every minute of this year –

including the five that were never five.

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Prologue: "When Are You Going to Shower?"

It is Sunday evening, shortly before nine. We have been listening to French chansons all evening, there is a cup of black tea with lemon on the table, and I am lying on the sofa, writing. My wife asks: "When are you going to shower?"

"Five minutes," I say.

I say it without looking up. And I say it without thinking. It is an answer I have been giving for decades, and it slipped out before I knew what I actually meant.

What do I mean? Certainly not five minutes. Nobody who says "five minutes" looks at a clock. "Five minutes" means: Not now. I'm busy. Leave me alone. And, to be honest: Please don't ask again.

My wife knows this. She does not ask again. She has a better idea. The sofa throw, she says, needs washing. It is dirty. I sit on it every day, and now I am lying on it as well. It has not been washed since we moved in at the beginning of October.

She is probably right. But it is Sunday evening, nine o'clock. Anyone who strips the throw now, loads the machine and waits for the programme to finish will not be asleep before midnight. The throw can wait. After all, it has been waiting for five weeks.

So there I lie, with two tasks in front of me. One takes a quarter of an hour, and I put it off. The other takes two hours, and I put it off for good reason. The difference between the two is the subject of this book.

At some point I read that anything that is due and takes little time should be done at once. Then it is done and no longer weighs on you. The American consultant David Allen turned this into a rule: anything that takes less than two minutes is done immediately.[1] A shower takes longer than two minutes. But certainly no longer than the time I am now spending writing about why I am not showering.

Our grandparents knew the rule as a proverb: Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. Most of us know the version with a wink: … put it off till tomorrow by all means. I would have sworn it came from "Gone with the Wind". It does not. At the end, Scarlett O'Hara merely says that tomorrow is another day.[2] That is something else. It is not procrastination but defiance. Someone who has lost everything postpones despair until tomorrow. I am only postponing a shower.

Two days before this Sunday I experienced what it is like when nobody says "five minutes". On Friday I went to the emergency department, and within minutes I was hooked up to the monitors. Nobody there says "in a minute". Every minute counts there, and everybody knows it. Perhaps it is no coincidence that I notice the five minutes on this very weekend.

This book is about the five minutes we say and do not mean. It is about the things we put off although they would be done in no time, and about those we are right to leave. It is about the caretaker who wanted to come at ten and came at eleven, about the bank that puts us on hold, and about the tax return that falls due by surprise every single year. And it is about the five minutes that, one day, we no longer get.

I started it immediately, that very evening. Putting off a book called "5 Minutes" until tomorrow would have been a breach of its own title.

And now I am going to shower. Really. In five minutes.

Notes and Sources

1 Allen, David (2001): Getting Things Done. The Art of Stress-Free Productivity. New York: Viking.

2 Mitchell, Margaret (1936): Gone with the Wind. New York: Macmillan.

PART I

The Formula

Chapter 1: Five Minutes – Anatomy of an Excuse

There are sentences we hear a hundred times a day and never notice. "Five minutes" is one of them. It is said at the dinner table and in the office, on the phone and on the stairs. It is said in the children's room when the light is supposed to go out and a small person with great negotiating skills asks for "five more minutes". It is said at half past six in the morning when the alarm rings and we grope for the snooze button with our eyes closed. And it is said on Sunday evening on the sofa when someone asks when we are finally going to shower.

Whoever says "five minutes" wants to get rid of something. Not the task – that remains. But the question about it. It is therefore worth looking at these two words as closely as one would otherwise only read a contract. What does it actually say? And what is in the small print?

Why Five, of All Numbers?

One could say "one minute". But one minute is too short and too precise. Whoever says "one minute" really has to get up within a minute, or he is exposed at once. One could also say "ten minutes". But ten minutes already sounds like a real delay, like an appointment, like a request for patience. Whoever says "ten minutes" has to explain why.

Five minutes lie exactly in between. They are short enough to sound harmless and long enough to escape. They sound like a number but work like a word. Nobody starts the stopwatch. Nobody expects it. Five minutes are not a statement of time but a currency with which we buy ourselves peace.

What the Formula Achieves

The formula achieves three things at once, and that is exactly why it is so successful.

First, it protects one's own peace. Someone absorbed in a piece of work, a thought, a text, does not want to be interrupted. "Five minutes" draws an invisible line around the desk. That is not always laziness. Sometimes it is simply concentration defending itself against a disturbance. Anyone who has ever been asked in the middle of a tax calculation whether we need more bread knows what I mean.

Second, it keeps the peace. "Five minutes" is a no that does not sound like a no. The sociologist Erving Goffman described how much effort people put into saving face in conversation – their own and the other person's.[1] The linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson built a whole theory of politeness on this: we wrap refusal in forms that do not hurt the other person.[2] "Five minutes" is such a wrapping. It does not say "I don't want to", but "I do want to, just not now". The one asking does not lose face, the one asked does not lose his peace. A perfect compromise – as long as nobody does the maths.

Third, it postpones a decision. This is the most insidious achievement of the formula. Whoever says "five minutes" has not yet decided whether he will do it at all. He has only decided not to decide now. The psychologist Piers Steel, who analysed a large number of studies on procrastination, describes exactly this core: we voluntarily delay something we actually intend to do, although we know it will harm us.[3] "Five minutes" is the polite short form of this contradiction.

A Code Everyone Knows

The astonishing thing is that the formula works although everyone sees through it. My wife knows that my five minutes are not five minutes. I know that she knows. And still I say it, and still she accepts it. We play a game whose rules we have never discussed.

In every long relationship a private exchange rate develops for this. At first, five minutes may mean ten. After a few years, twenty. At some point the other person says: "I know your five minutes." By then at the latest the formula is devalued, and new means are needed. For us, on that Sunday evening, it was the sofa throw. My wife did not ask about the shower a second time. She put a new task on the table. That is a clever negotiator's answer to a devalued currency: change the subject and raise the stakes.

The Inflation of Small Promises

As a tax adviser I have dealt with money and with promises all my working life. Both work on the same principle: their value depends on trust. A franc is worth as much as others believe it is worth. And a promise is worth as much as the number of times it has been kept.

Five minutes are a small promise. Whoever breaks it too often creates inflation. Every further "five minutes" is worth less than the one before, until it buys nothing at all. Then people no longer believe us even about the things we really would do in five minutes.

In the past I arranged bridging loans and account openings for clients, often within half an hour. That was only possible because the people on the other side knew: when I said "in half an hour", I meant half an hour. Trust is nothing other than time promises kept. Doors open for those who mean their "right away". Those who do not mean it end up standing in front of closed ones.

Double It and Go Up a Unit

When I still managed staff, I had my own conversion table. When I asked someone how long a task would take, I took the answer, doubled the number and moved up to the next unit of time. If an employee said "five minutes", I knew: it is worth following up in ten hours at the earliest. "Two hours" became four days, "a week" became two months.

That sounds like a joke, and to some extent it is one. But the rule was right astonishingly often. Not because my employees were unreliable, but because people almost always underestimate how long things take.

The psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky found a name for this: the planning fallacy.[4] We plan as if everything will go smoothly and forget the interruptions, the queries and the telephone that always rings at the wrong moment. Even those who know they regularly misjudge misjudge again next time. Roger Buehler and his colleagues demonstrated this with students who, despite all their experience, set their deadlines too optimistically.[5] The writer Douglas Hofstadter turned it into a law that pokes fun at itself: it always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law.[6]

This gives the five minutes a second face. Not every "five minutes" is an excuse. Sometimes we really believe it. We believe the e-mail will be written in five minutes, the phone call done in five minutes, the text corrected in five minutes. And then it is midnight. The excuse deceives the other person. Overconfidence deceives ourselves.

So before we smile at other people's five minutes, it is worth looking at our own: how often have I said "five minutes" – and how often was it actually five?

And How One Could Say It Differently

Does this mean one may never say "five minutes" again? No. But one can get used to being more honest – with the other person and with oneself. There are basically three honest answers to the question of when you will do something.

The first is: "Now." And then you get up and do it. That is the best answer when the task is small. A shower is one of them.

The second is: "At half past nine." A real time instead of a phrase. It gives the other person something to hold on to, and ourselves a deadline we have to take seriously.

The third is: "Not today." That is the bravest answer, because it is a no that sounds like a no. But it is often the wisest. The sofa throw at nine on a Sunday evening is the best example – even though I did not get away with it that evening.

All three answers have something in common: they make a decision. "Five minutes" makes none. It merely pushes the decision ahead of us, the way one pushes a shopping trolley whose contents one has long since forgotten.

The next chapter is about the relatives of the five minutes: "in a minute", "just a moment" and the famous "I'm already on my way". They are just as harmless – and just as revealing.

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End of the reading sample

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